*SŪRAH 67*

# Al-Mulk

(Dominion)

## Prologue

Whereas the revelation of the previous ten *sūrahs* (57–66) took place in Madīnah, this *sūrah* and all nine that follow in this volume were revealed in Makkah. Each type has its own features and leaves its special impressions on the reader. Makkan revelation generally deals with belief in God, revelation and the Day of Judgement, as well as establishing concepts about life, the universe and its relation with its Creator based on such beliefs. It speaks about God, the Creator, in such a way that makes our hearts feel His presence and outlines the sort of emotions and manners that are appropriate for a human being who addresses his Lord and looks up to Him. It clearly sets the standards and values a Muslim adopts in judging events, situations and people. As we discuss the remaining *sūrahs* in this volume, we will see examples of such treatment, to be added to what we have already seen in other Makkan *sūrahs*.

Revelations given in Madīnah address the implementation of such beliefs, concepts, standards and values in practical life. They urge people to live up to their faith, which is the trust assigned to them. They must fulfil their obligations both within themselves and in their public lives.

The present *sūrah* seeks to formulate a new concept of the universe and its relation with its Creator. It is a broad, comprehensive concept that transcends the world we live in and our limited lifespans to include the universe at large and the life to come. It speaks of creatures living on earth alongside man, such as the *jinn* and the birds, or belonging to the hereafter, such as hell and its guards. Furthermore, it refers to worlds beyond the reach of our human perception bringing these closer to our feelings so that we do not focus solely on our present life on earth. It invites us to reflect on what we see in our lives and within ourselves but which we tend to take for granted.

It awakens within man all images and impressions that have long been stagnant as a result of holding on to *jāhiliyyah* concepts. It removes the dust that has gathered over our feelings, opens windows and releases minds, and frees senses and perceptions so that they can look at the wide horizon, the vast space, the deep oceans, the inner soul and the world beyond, reflecting on God's marvellous creation. It invites us to look at how the universe moves on by God's will. We thus realize that the whole thing is far greater and its scope much wider than we could possibly have imagined. Then, we no longer focus on our earth, but instead look up to heaven; we move from what we see to the truth beyond and we are able to see how God's will both brings life and controls it.

Life and death are two familiar phenomena. Yet the *sūrah* invites us to look at what lies beyond these two phenomena of God's will, wisdom, and the way He sets tests and conducts all affairs. It is God: "*who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.*" (Verse 2) The skies above are creatures people see with their eyes. Yet they do not look beyond them to see God's hand that brought them into existence, nor the perfection they manifest. The *sūrah*, however, initiates action so that we contemplate such beauty and perfection as well as the ultimate objective of creation: "*He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with.*" (Verses 3–5)

To those who live in a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, the life of this world appears to be the ultimate objective. The *sūrah*, however, presents another world to devils and unbelievers, a world that is full of movement and expectation. It stands in waiting: "*We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?' 'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy].*" (Verses 5–11)

In a world of *jāhiliyyah*, people hardly ever look beyond their immediate life or think of a world beyond what they can perceive. They are, as it were, locked within the cage of their current life on earth. The *sūrah*, therefore, directs their minds and sights to look to what is beyond, to the heavens and the divine will which, though unseen by any human eye, can do whatever it wills, whenever and wherever it chooses. Thus, the earth, stable as it appears before their eyes, is strongly shaken: "*Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. How could it be that He who has created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning.*" (Verses 13–17)

They look at birds, an aspect of creation they see frequently but which they rarely contemplate its marvellous creation. The *sūrah* again fixes their eyes on this and lets their minds appreciate God's power as He shapes and fashions His creation: "*Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything.*" (Verse 19)

They feel safe and secure on earth, but this is only the false sense of one who is oblivious to what God's will and power may bring about. Having shaken the earth under their feet, including all that forms their environment, the *sūrah* then shakes them even harder so that they realize that nothing can ever withstand God's power, which they hardly ever even take into account: "*What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.*" (Verse 20)

They feel that the provisions they have are close at hand, and that they can compete for them as they please. The *sūrah*, however, directs their attentions to look far beyond the elements they think to be involved in securing their provisions: "*Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.*" (Verse 21)

As they pursue their erring ways, thinking they are well guided, the *sūrah* paints them a vivid, inspiring image showing their own condition and that of those who truly follow correct guidance: "*Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path?*" (Verse 22)

They do not benefit by what God has placed in their make-up of talents, faculties and perceptions. They do not go beyond what they perceive so as to look at what lies beyond their immediate world. The *sūrah* reminds them of God's grace as He has given them these abilities, and directs them to use these in a way that tries to divine the future and determine the ultimate objective: "*Say: 'It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful. And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.*" (Verses 23–24)

Even in their persistent denial of the resurrection, they still constantly ask about its timing. The *sūrah* depicts this as a true and imminent event, one that will approach them all of a sudden. Hence, they have nothing but distaste for it: "*They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.' When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.'*" (Verses 25–27)

They hope that the Prophet and those who follow him will perish, as this will silence this voice that has for long irritated them by the warnings it delivers. They would rather revert to their foolish slumber. The *sūrah* reminds them that whether this group of believers perish or flourish, it cannot affect their own destiny that is determined by a persistent rejection of faith. Hence, they are better advised to look at their own situation and to make amends before it is too late: "*Say: 'Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?' Say: 'He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.'*" (Verses 28–29)

Finally, the *sūrah* warns them that water, which is essential for life, may be taken away by God, whom the unbelievers deny: "*Say: Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?*" (Verse 30)

The key to the whole *sūrah* and the axis of the movement it sets in our hearts, minds, senses and feelings are found in its inspiring opening: "*Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) It is from the truth of God's dominion and power that all images presented in the *sūrah*, as well as all hidden and apparent movements to which it alludes, branch out. Thus, the creation of life and death, testing people through them, the creation of the heavens and their adornment with lamps that serve as missiles pelting devils, the preparation of hell as it is described, the knowledge of what is secret and public, making the earth easy for humans to live upon, the destruction of early communities who rejected divine guidance, holding birds in the sky, God's overwhelming power and His exaltation, providing sustenance to all as He pleases, His creation of people and granting them hearing, eyesight and hearts, causing them to multiply on earth and then gathering them all, His full knowledge of the hereafter which is His own preserve, the meting out of punishment to the unbelievers, the provision of water, which is essential to life, and the ability to take it away whenever He wishes all emanate from the fact that to God belongs all dominion in the universe. He has power over all things.

The *sūrah* states a long sequence of truths that flow uninterruptedly with successive impressions and ideas to explain its concise, yet comprehensive, opening. It is, therefore, difficult to divide into passages. Let us, then, look at it as it develops its theme from start to finish.

# I

# The Sovereign of the Universe

**Al-Mulk** (Dominion)

سُورَةُ الْمُلْكِ

*In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful*

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things; (1)

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ الْمُلْكُ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١﴾

who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving. (2)

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفُورُ ﴿٢﴾

He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? (3)

الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا ۖ مَّا تَرَىٰ فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ مِن تَفَاوُتٍ ۖ فَارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَىٰ مِن فُطُورٍ ﴿٣﴾

Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. (4)

ثُمَّ ارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنقَلِبْ إِلَيْكَ الْبَصَرُ خَاسِئًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ ﴿٤﴾

وَلَقَدْ زَيَّنَّا ٱلسَّمَآءَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِمَصَٰبِيحَ
وَجَعَلْنَٰهَا رُجُومًا لِّلشَّيَٰطِينِ ۖ وَأَعْتَدْنَا
لَهُمْ عَذَابَ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿٥﴾

We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with. We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. (5)

وَلِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِرَبِّهِمْ عَذَابُ جَهَنَّمَ ۖ
وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٦﴾

Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. (6)

إِذَآ أُلْقُوا۟ فِيهَا سَمِعُوا۟ لَهَا شَهِيقًا وَهِىَ
تَفُورُ ﴿٧﴾

When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, (7)

تَكَادُ تَمَيَّزُ مِنَ ٱلْغَيْظِ ۖ كُلَّمَآ أُلْقِىَ فِيهَا فَوْجٌ
سَأَلَهُمْ خَزَنَتُهَآ أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ نَذِيرٌ ﴿٨﴾

almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?' (8)

قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ قَدْ جَآءَنَا نَذِيرٌ فَكَذَّبْنَا وَقُلْنَا
مَا نَزَّلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن شَىْءٍ إِنْ أَنتُمْ إِلَّا فِى
ضَلَٰلٍ كَبِيرٍ ﴿٩﴾

'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' (9)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْ كُنَّا نَسْمَعُ أَوْ نَعْقِلُ مَا كُنَّا فِىٓ
أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿١٠﴾

They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' (10)

فَٱعْتَرَفُوا۟ بِذَنۢبِهِمْ ۖ فَسُحْقًا لِّأَصْحَٰبِ
ٱلسَّعِيرِ ﴿١١﴾

Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy]. (11)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلْغَيْبِ لَهُم
مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Those who stand in awe of their Lord although He is beyond the reach of human perception will have forgiveness and a rich reward. (12)

وَأَسِرُّوا۟ قَوْلَكُمْ أَوِ ٱجْهَرُوا۟ بِهِۦٓ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
عَلِيمٌۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿١٣﴾

Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. (13)

أَلَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ ٱللَّطِيفُ ٱلْخَبِيرُ ﴿١٤﴾

How could it be that He who has created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware. (14)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ ذَلُولًا
فَٱمْشُوا۟ فِى مَنَاكِبِهَا وَكُلُوا۟ مِن رِّزْقِهِۦ ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ
ٱلنُّشُورُ ﴿١٥﴾

He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected. (15)

ءَأَمِنتُم مَّن فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ أَن يَخْسِفَ بِكُمُ
ٱلْأَرْضَ فَإِذَا هِىَ تَمُورُ ﴿١٦﴾

Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? (16)

أَمْ أَمِنتُم مَّن فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ أَن يُرْسِلَ عَلَيْكُمْ
حَاصِبًا ۖ فَسَتَعْلَمُونَ كَيْفَ نَذِيرِ ﴿١٧﴾

Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning. (17)

وَلَقَدْ كَذَّبَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ فَكَيْفَ
كَانَ نَكِيرِ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them? (18)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ إِلَى ٱلطَّيْرِ فَوْقَهُمْ صَٰٓفَّٰتٍ وَيَقْبِضْنَ ۚ مَا يُمْسِكُهُنَّ إِلَّا ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍۭ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١٩﴾

Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything. (19)

أَمَّنْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى هُوَ جُندٌ لَّكُمْ يَنصُرُكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ۚ إِنِ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ إِلَّا فِى غُرُورٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion. (20)

أَمَّنْ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى يَرْزُقُكُمْ إِنْ أَمْسَكَ رِزْقَهُۥ ۚ بَل لَّجُّوا۟ فِى عُتُوٍّ وَنُفُورٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion. (21)

أَفَمَن يَمْشِى مُكِبًّا عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِۦٓ أَهْدَىٰٓ أَمَّن يَمْشِى سَوِيًّا عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path? (22)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَنشَأَكُمْ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَٱلْأَبْصَٰرَ وَٱلْأَفْـِٔدَةَ ۖ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Say: 'It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful. (23)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلَّذِى ذَرَأَكُمْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.' (24)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلْوَعْدُ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (25)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا ٱلْعِلْمُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَإِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

Say: 'God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.' (26)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ زُلْفَةً سِيٓـَٔتْ وُجُوهُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَقِيلَ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَدَّعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.' (27)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَهْلَكَنِىَ ٱللَّهُ وَمَن مَّعِىَ أَوْ رَحِمَنَا فَمَن يُجِيرُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ مِنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

Say: 'Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?' (28)

قُلْ هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ وَعَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْنَا ۖ فَسَتَعْلَمُونَ مَنْ هُوَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Say: 'He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.' (29)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَصْبَحَ مَآؤُكُمْ غَوْرًا فَمَن يَأْتِيكُم بِمَآءٍ مَّعِينٍۭ ﴿٣٠﴾

Say: 'Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?' (30)

**God's Power of Creation**

*Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests; who has power over all things.* (Verse 1)

Coming as it does at the outset of the *sūrah*, this glorification imparts a feeling of the multiplication of God's blessings and their continued outflowing. The fact that dominion is mentioned alongside it suggests

that this blessing flows over God's kingdom. Hence, it is glorified throughout the universe, as it is glorified with God Himself. It sounds like a hymn echoed throughout the universe and within every creature's heart. It begins with the divine word in God's glorious book, the Qur'ān, inscribed in a well-guarded record, and which spreads throughout the universe.

"*Blessed be He in whose hand all dominion rests.*" (Verse 1) He is the Sovereign who has full control over the universe; He conducts its affairs. When this truth is established in the human heart, its direction and destination become well defined. It no longer turns to anyone or relies on anyone other than the Sovereign to whom all dominion belongs. It feels free from submission to anyone else. It, thus, addresses its worship to none other than Him.

"*Who has power over all things.*" (Verse 1) Nothing escapes Him, and no one diverts or limits His will. He creates and does what He wants. He has full power over everything. His will is subject to neither limitation nor restriction. As this truth becomes well established, the human mind is free to perceive God's will and action that are free of any restriction our senses, perception of reality or what lies beyond it, or indeed our imagination can visualize. God's power extends far beyond anything that a human mind can entertain. After all, human imagination is restricted in its expectation of change by what is familiar to it. Appreciation of the truth of God's limitless power removes this restriction. Hence, a believer expects God's power to accomplish anything, without limit or restriction.

> *Who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.* (Verse 2)

One of the results of His complete dominion of the universe and absolute power over all things is that He created death and life. The term 'death' in this context includes the death that precedes life and the one that follows its end, whereas 'life' includes this first life and the life to come. All these are of God's creation as stated in this verse. In this way, it establishes this truth in the human mind, alerting it to the test it aims

to set. Nothing, then, comes by blind coincidence or without purpose. The test aims to establish, in reality, what God knows in advance of people's behaviour on earth and the reward they merit for their actions: "*so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct.*" (Verse 2) Thus, man should always be on the alert, considering every thought and every action. He should not be oblivious to anything. This also means that he is unable to rest. Hence, the verse ends with the comment, "*He alone is Almighty, Much-Forgiving.*" It thus gives reassurance to every God-fearing servant. God is certainly Almighty, but He is at the same time Much-Forgiving. When a person's heart is alert, aware that this life is a test, and tries to keep on the right track, he is reassured of God's forgiveness and grace. This gives man all the rest and comfort he needs.

The truth Islam establishes in people's hearts does not depict God as chasing humans to afflict or punish them. He only wants them to be aware of the purpose behind their existence and of their true nature. He wants them to rise to the level worthy of His honour when He blew of His own spirit into them, elevating them above many of His other creations. When they have absorbed this truth and hold to it, they will find that His grace, mercy and forgiveness are always available to them.

### In the Wide Universe

This great truth is then anchored to the universe at its broadest and highest. At the same time, the universe is shown to be related to the truth of reward and requital in the life to come:

> *He created seven heavens in layers. No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates. Turn up your eyes: can you see any flaw? Then look again, and again: your vision will come back to you dull and weary. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them missiles to pelt the devils with. We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire. Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination. When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury. Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one*

*come to warn you?' 'Yes,' they will reply, 'a warner did indeed come to us, but we did not believe him. We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error."' They will further say, 'Had we but listened, or reasoned, we would not now be among the inhabitants of the blazing fire.' Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy].* (Verses 3–11)

Everything this passage mentions is a result of the first verse and is an aspect of the complete sovereignty God exercises over His dominion and of His free, unrestricted power. Everything it contains confirms what the second verse states of the creation of death and life to test people and then their reward according to what their test proves.

"*He created seven heavens in layers.*" (Verse 3) We cannot, on the basis of astronomical theories, exactly ascertain the meaning of the expression '*seven heavens in layers*'. These theories are subject to amendment and correction with every new generation of telescopes and other machines and tools. It is not right, therefore, to attach the meaning of the Qur'ānic statement to discoveries that remain subject to amendment and correction. It is sufficient for us to know that there are seven heavens, and that they are placed in layers of different dimensions.

Whilst the Qur'ān always turns our attentions to God's creation generally, it also specifically directs us to the heavens above. The perfection of His creation is enough to make our eyes turn back in absolute amazement: "*No fault will you see in what the Lord of Grace creates.*" (Verse 3) No flaw, no defect, no imbalance is ever seen in God's creation. "*Turn up your eyes,*" and look again. "*Can you see any flaw?*" (Verse 3) Can you detect anything out of place? "*Then look again, and again.*" (Verse 4) You might have overlooked something in your first perusal, so make sure by looking again and again. "*Your vision will come back to you dull and weary.*" (Verse 4)

Posing such a challenge heightens the importance of what people are being directed towards. In this way, they are made to look seriously at the heavens and at God's creation in general. It is precisely such a contemplating, examining look that the Qur'ān wants people to cast. Familiarity breeds contempt, and our long presence in this world takes much away from its fascinating perfection and meticulous cohesion.

Yet a careful look will not tire of examining the beauty of the world around us; our hearts will want more of its inspiration, and our minds will reflect endlessly on the universe's perfect balance. When we cast such a reflective and examining look at the universe we see it as an overwhelmingly amazing festival of wonders. Every time we so look our eyes and minds see something new.

Anyone who knows even a little about the nature of the universe and its system, some aspects of which have been uncovered by modern science, is bound to be absolutely fascinated. Yet appreciation of the universe's miraculous beauty does not need such scientific discoveries. One aspect of God's blessings is that He has given man the ability to interact with the universe by merely looking at it and contemplating its many different facets. Our hearts directly receive the tune of this awesomely beautiful universe and can respond to it as living creatures respond to each other.

Therefore, the Qur'ān invites people to look at the universe and reflect on its wonders. The Qur'ān addresses all people, across all generations: it addresses those who live in the jungle or the desert, as well as city dwellers and sea travellers. It presents its truth to the person who cannot read or write just as it does to astronomers, physicists and scientists. Everyone of these find in the Qur'ān what invites him to establish contact with the universe. It is that that alerts his heart to reflect on and enjoy what he sees.

Like perfection, beauty is also deliberately placed in the universe. Indeed, the two stem from the same truth. When perfection is attained, beauty is a part of it. Hence, having drawn our attention to the perfection in the creation of the heavens, the Qur'ān now mentions their beauty: "*We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps.*" (Verse 5) What is the lowest heaven? Perhaps it is the one nearest to the earth and its people to whom the Qur'ān is addressed. The lamps mentioned here may refer to the stars and planets that we see with the naked eye as we look up to the sky. This fits with the invitation to look at the sky at a time when they had nothing other than their eyes and what they saw of shining stars.

Undoubtedly, the sight of stars in the sky is immensely beautiful. Such beauty is always renewed, emanating different aspects at different times, morning or evening, sunrise or sunset, a moonlit night or a moonless

one, clear skies or overcast ones. Indeed, its beauty differs from one hour to the next, from one observatory or angle to another. Yet the sky is always awesome in its beauty. Look at that single star flickering at a distance, as though it is a beautiful eye, shining with the appeal of love. Those two other stars appear removed from the rest, as though they are two lovers whispering to each other, away from the crowd. Look around and you see clusters joining together here and there, as if they are a group enjoying a night out in the great and vast open space. They seem to come together or go their separate ways like those attending a night performance in the open air. The moon appears in full splendour one night, dreamy on another, feeling low and dispirited on a third, and looking like a newborn starting life one night and like an elderly expecting the end on another. Look also at this vast space that stretches way beyond what our eyes can see. It is all part of the beauty of this universe; a beauty we can only look at and enjoy, but about which we do not have the words and expressions to describe.

The Qur'ān directs our hearts to reflect on the beauty of the skies and the universe as a whole, because appreciating such beauty is the closest way to comprehend their Creator's own beauty. It is this comprehension that elevates man to the highest level he can attain. When he reaches this, he is ready for an eternal life in a splendid world that is free from the shackles of earthly life. The happiest moments for a human heart are those in which it appreciates the beauty of God's creation in the universe. These are the moments that make it possible for him to feel and appreciate divine beauty.

### Pelting Lamps

The *sūrah* states that the lamps which adorn the lowest heaven also have another function: "*And made them missiles to pelt the devils with.*" (Verse 5) We have established a rule in this commentary that we do not try to add any explanation to any matter relating to the world beyond our faculties of perception. We limit ourselves only to whatever God tells us about them, leaving the Qur'ānic text as it is. This is certainly enough to state whatever is needed for our comprehension. We certainly believe that a different type of creation is the devils. Some description of them

is given in the Qur'ān, and we have referred to these in our commentary wherever they occur. We have though added nothing to what the Qur'ān states. We, therefore, believe that these lamps, which God placed as adornments of the lowest heaven, are also used as missiles to pelt devils with. This may be in the form of shooting stars, as mentioned in another *sūrah*: "*We have adorned the skies nearest to the earth with stars, and have made them secure against every rebellious devil... If any of them stealthily snatches away a fragment, he will be pursued by a piercing flame.*" (37: 6–7 and 10) How? In what form and of what size? God has told us nothing of this and we have no other source to refer to in such matters. Therefore, we have all we need to know and we should believe in this as it is. This is all there is to it. Had God known that further details or explanations would have benefited us, He would have given us these. Why, then, should we try to reach to what God knows to be of no use to us in such a matter as the pelting or shooting of devils?

The *sūrah* speaks further about what God has in store for such devils, other than these pelting missiles: "*We have prepared for them suffering through the blazing fire.*" (Verse 5) This means that they will be pelted with missiles in this present life and that they will suffer the blazing fire in the life to come. Perhaps this comes as a follow up to what the *sūrah* says about the heavens and prior to what it says about the unbelievers. The relation between devils and unbelievers is obvious. Thus, having mentioned the heavens and their lamps, the *sūrah* refers to these lamps' other function, as missiles for pelting devils. Then, as it speaks of what is prepared for these devils in the life to come, the *sūrah* mentions what is made ready for the unbelievers who follow those devils: "*Suffering in hell awaits those who deny their Lord: an evil destination.*" (Verse 6) It then carries on to give us an image of hell, full of rage and anger, as it receives the unbelievers: "*When they are thrown in it, they will hear it drawing in its breath as it boils up, almost bursting with fury.*" (Verses 7–8)

**Praised by All Creatures**

Hell seems here to be a living creature, one suppressing its fury, but as a result of which draws its breath and boils over. Its anger is so immense that it almost bursts with hate for the unbelievers. Although

this may appear to some as an allegorical description of hell, to my mind, it describes a reality. Every creature of God is a living creature, with a life suited to its kind. Every creature knows its Lord and addresses Him with glorifications and praises. They are amazed at man when he denies his Creator and feel anger as a result. This is mentioned in several places in the Qur'ān, suggesting that it is an established reality in the universe.

For example, the following clear statement occurs in the Qur'ān: "*The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving.*" (17: 44) The Qur'ān also says: "*We graced David with Our favour. We said: 'You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!'*" (34: 10) These statements are so clear that they admit no interpretation other than what they literally say. Another Qur'ānic statement says: "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.'*" (41: 11) This last statement may be said to be an allegory of how the skies and earth submit to God's law, but there is no need to make such an interpretation. It is further removed than the direct and clear meaning intended.

We have the present description of hell, but a similar statement describes the surprise and anger expressed by different creatures at the thought of attributing to God a son: "*They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Indeed you have said a most monstrous falsehood, at which the heavens might be rent into fragments, and the earth be split asunder, and the mountains fall down in ruins! That people should ascribe a son to the Most Merciful, although it is inconceivable that the Most Merciful should take to Himself a son.*" (19: 88–92)

All these statements refer to the truth that the universe believes in its Creator, and that everything extols His glory and praise. They also confirm that all creatures shudder at the thought that man departs from this norm, disbelieving in his Lord. All these creatures feel anger when someone close and dear to them is badly hurt. It is no different from the anger a person is ready to vent at the one who committed such behaviour. He is almost bursting with fury, just like hell is described here: "*It boils up, almost bursting with fury.*" (Verses 7–8)

The same is expressed by the angels who guard hell: "*Every time a group is thrown in it, its keepers will ask them, 'Did no one come to warn you?'*" (Verse 8) It is clear that the question is meant as a rebuke. They share hell's anger and they participate in meting out punishment. Nothing hurts a person in distress more than a rebuke. The answer is given in humility, acknowledging their own lack of judgement and utter stupidity when they denied God's oneness, relying on no evidence whatsoever. Furthermore, they make a wild accusation against God's messengers, who have always stated the truth, clear and simple: "*We said, "God has revealed nothing. You are in total error.'*" (Verse 9)

"*Thus they shall confess their sins. Far be the inhabitants of the blazing fire [from God's mercy].*" (Verse 11) This is a prayer made by God against them. This after they have acknowledged their guilt, at a time and place they denied would ever occur. Prayer by God denotes a judgement. Thus, they are far removed from God's mercy. They cannot hope for forgiveness or exemption from punishment. They dwell in the blazing fire. What a fate!

Such torment in the blazing fire that draws its breath as it boils is truly fearsome. God does not treat anyone unfairly. We think – but God knows best – that a person who denies his Lord, when God has instilled the truth of faith and its evidence in his very nature, is one that is devoid of all goodness. Such a person deprives himself of every quality that gives him a position in this universe. He is like the stones that are the fuel of hell. He ends up in the middle of the fire, with no hope of reprieve.

The one who denies God during his life on earth sinks further every day into the darkness of disbelief, until he ends up in an ugly shape, derived from hell. It is so ugly an image that it is unlike anything else in this universe. Everything in the universe has a believing soul that extols God's praises. In everything and every creature there is this element of goodness and this tie which pulls it towards the centre of existence, with the exception of those unbelievers who run loose, severing their ties with the rest of the universe, rebelling against all standards and values. Where will they end up in this universe when they have no bond with anything in it? They can only end up in hell, which rages in fury against

them. They have deprived themselves of all right, meaning and dignity. Hence, in hell they receive none.

It is customary in the Qur'ān to portray images of the Day of Judgement in two contrasting scenes. Hence, we now have a scene showing the believers as compared with the unbelievers. In this way, we have the full meaning of the statement at the *sūrah*'s outset: "*He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct.*" (Verse 2) Having mentioned the test, the *sūrah* completes its account by speaking of the reward: "*Those who stand in awe of their Lord although He is beyond the reach of human perception will have forgiveness and a rich reward.*" (Verse 12)

The phrase '*beyond the reach of human perception*' expresses the meaning of the Qur'ānic word *ghayb*. In its use in this verse it includes their fear of God whom they have never seen, as well as their fear of Him when they are alone, unseen by any human eye. Both are fine qualities, reflecting a pure feeling and a profound understanding which together qualify a person to receive what the *sūrah* expresses in general terms as "*forgiveness and a rich reward.*"

To watch God when one is alone, unseen by any other human being is the gauge of a heart's sensitivity and the quality that keeps conscience alive. Anas ibn Mālik reports that some of the Prophet's Companions said to him: "Messenger of God! When we are with you we are at a certain standard, but when we depart we are at a different one." He asked: "How do you feel with regard to your Lord?" They answered: "God is our Lord in secret and open situations." He said: "Yours is not a case of hypocrisy." The bond of God is, then, the essential criterion. Once it is firm in one's heart, one is a true believer.

**All in the Open**

This last verse provides a bridge linking what precedes it with what comes after. It emphasizes God's knowledge of everything, whether it is said in public or private. He, thus, challenges mankind. It is He who created them and He who knows their inner souls:

> *Whether you keep your words secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts. How could it be that He who has*

*created should not know all? He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware.* (Verses 13–14)

They are told they can say what they like, in whatever way they like; it is all equally known to God, for He knows what is concealed deeper even than secrets. "*He has full knowledge of what is in all hearts.*" (Verse 13) Even those thoughts that are kept deep within one's breast, unexpressed, are also known to Him. It is He who created these thoughts, just as He created the breasts that keep them. "*How could it be that He who has created should not know all?*" (Verse 14) The One who has created them must surely know all about them. "*He is indeed Most Gracious, All-Aware.*" (Verse 14) His knowledge encompasses every little detail and every hidden feeling and thought.

Yet people try to hide themselves from God, by making a move here, keeping a secret there or by hiding their intentions. How ludicrous! Their minds in which they try to hide their intentions, are created by God, and He knows all their pathways and hidden corners. Indeed, the intentions they seek to hide are also God's creation; He knows how they are formulated and where they are lodged. So, what can people hide, and where will they turn to?

The Qur'ān makes sure of instilling this truth in people's minds because this gives them the correct understanding. Additionally, it keeps people alert and conscious of God, able to fulfil the trust believers are assigned in this world. This is the trust of faith, maintaining justice and dedication to God in both action and intention. Such understanding cannot be achieved until we clearly realize that we, our hearts and minds, our secrets and intentions, are all of God's creation; it is all fully known to Him. When a believer attains such realization, he purges his heart of bad intentions and fleeting thoughts just as he keeps his open behaviour and expressed statements on the right track. He deals with God in all situations, public or private, open or secret.

**Mankind's Abode**

The *sūrah* now refers to the earth, which God has created for man to live on. He smoothed it and provided in it all the means that enable it to support human life:

*He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions. To Him you will be resurrected.* (Verse 15)

Man has lived long on earth finding it easy to settle upon, walk along and utilize its potentials – including its soil, water, air, minerals and all other natural resources. Hence, people forget God's blessing as He made the earth easy for them to live on and to benefit by what it contains. The *sūrah* reminds them of this great blessing, putting it before their eyes, in a fine expression that everyone, regardless of when do they live, can understand according to their knowledge of the earth and its potentials.

The description of the earth as easy to live upon meant for those generations of old the surface of the earth and its being smoothed out so that people and animals could walk upon it, and boats could sail through its seas. It also meant for them that it has been made suitable for cultivation and harvest, and given the sorts of atmosphere, water and soil to make life possible. These, however, are general notions. Scientific discoveries, up to the present day, provide further details that give a much broader sense to this Qur'ānic statement.

The Arabic term used in the *sūrah* to describe the earth as 'easy to live upon' is *dhalūl*, which is normally used to describe an animal that is 'broken' so that man can use it as a mount. Science tells us that use of this term is apt, because the earth which we see as stable and motionless is nonetheless certainly moving. What is more is that it is running at a fast pace, without stopping. Nevertheless, it is broken so as not to throw off its rider and not to trample him as it goes along. It does not shake him as it moves, but rather gives him an easy ride. Moreover, it is just like a mount that produces milk, yielding much.

The earth, this mount man rides, revolves at a speed of 1,000 miles per hour, and, at the same time, moves in its orbit around the sun at a speed of approximately 65,000 miles per hour. Furthermore, the earth, the sun and the solar system travel in space at a speed of around 20,000 miles per hour. Despite such speedy movements, man stays in perfect comfort and stability on the earth's surface. Nothing tears him apart, nor

are his belongings thrown in the air. Indeed, he suffers neither dizziness nor concussion. Instead, he remains firmly on his mount.

These three movements have a definite purpose. We know the effect of two of these movements on human life, and on life on earth in general. As the earth revolves, the day and night alternate. Had night been the permanent condition, all life on earth would have been frozen out. By contrast, a permanent day condition would result in everything being burnt. The earth's orbiting of the sun causes the four seasons we enjoy each year. Had any of these seasons been permanent, life would not have been possible in the form God has willed. We have not as yet discovered the purpose of the third movement in the solar system, but it must relate to the overall harmony clearly noticeable in the universe.

Despite these three exceedingly fast movements, this broken mount, the earth, maintains the same position defined by the position of its axis at an angle of 23.5 degrees. This position of the earth's axis is instrumental in producing, along with the earth's orbit, the four seasons. A change in the axis angle would disrupt the cycle of the four seasons. Yet maintaining this cycle is essential for the life of plants, and indeed for all life on earth.

God has made the earth easy for man to live upon by giving it a gravity which keeps people steady and in balance, while it makes its three speedy movements. He also determined the degree of its atmospheric pressure to make man's overall movement easy. Had this pressure been heavier, man would have found moving about much harder, or even impossible, depending on the level of such pressure. For certain, heavy atmospheric pressure would either hinder man's movement or crush him completely. Had it been lighter, man's movement would have lacked stability. Indeed, he would have suffered implosions within his body, because his body pressure would be high in relation to the atmospheric pressure: this does indeed sometimes happen to those who climb to high altitudes.

Furthermore, God has stretched the surface of the earth, giving it its soft soil. Had its surface been made of hard rock, as scientific theories suppose should have been the case following the earth's cooling and hardening, walking on its surface would have been very difficult,

and it would not have produced any plant life. Rain, wind and other atmospheric elements managed to crush this solid surface so as to form, by God's will, this fertile soil, allowing plant life to flourish for the benefit of man and animal alike. God also made the air above the earth's surface, putting in it the elements necessary for life in all their accurate proportions. Had these proportions been different, life would have been disturbed, even been impossible. Oxygen constitutes 21% of the element air, while nitrogen forms 78% of it. The remainder is made up of carbon monoxide at a rate of 3 portions out of 10,000, as well as other elements. These are the exact proportions vital for supporting life on earth. In addition, thousands of other correlations have been established by God so as to make life on earth possible. These include the sizes of the earth, the sun and the moon, the distance between these three, the level of the sun's temperature, the thickness of the earth's crust, its speed, the angle of its axis, the proportion of sea water to dry land, the density of air covering it, and so forth. Maintaining all these together is what 'breaks' the earth, making it ready to support life, allowing it to produce sustenance and enabling life in general, and human life in particular, to flourish.

The *sūrah* refers to these facts so that they are understood and appreciated by every individual and every generation as they are able to do so, and as their levels of knowledge and observation put before them. Thus, they realize that God's hand, in which all dominion rests, takes care of them and of all around them, makes the earth easy for them to live upon, keeping them and the earth safe and secure. Should this divine care be withheld for just one moment, the whole universe would reel out of control, leading to its destruction along with all those living on it.

When man's heart is alert to this great fact, God, the Creator, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, allows him to go about wherever he wishes, and to eat of His provisions: "*He it is who has made the earth easy to live upon. Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions.*" (Verse 15) Permission to go about the highlands incorporates walking along its plains and valleys. When the more difficult enterprise is allowed, the easier one goes without saying. The provisions available on earth

are all of God's creation and belong to Him. What God has provided is much wider in its significance than what we understand from the term 'provision', even when it is used in the plural form. It does not refer to the money one has in hand to pay for one's needs and enjoyments. Rather, it refers to everything God has placed on the earth that man can use to earn something that contributes to his livelihood. Essentially, these are part of the earth's composition of the elements that are present in their relative proportions, as also the ability God gave to plant, animal and man to use these elements and benefit by them:

> As is well known, all vegetable life is dependent upon the almost infinitesimal quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere which, so to speak, it breathes. To express this complicated photosynthetic chemical reaction in the simplest possible way, the leaves of the trees are lungs and they have the power when in the sunlight to separate this obstinate carbon dioxide into carbon and oxygen. In other words, the oxygen is given off and the carbon retained and combined with the hydrogen of the water brought up by the plant from its roots. By magical chemistry, out of these elements nature makes sugar, cellulose, and numerous other chemicals, fruits and flowers. The plant feeds itself and produces enough more to feed every animal on earth. At the same time, the plant releases the oxygen we breathe and without which life would end in five minutes… So, all the plants, the forests, the grasses, every bit of moss, and all else of vegetable life, build their structure principally out of carbon and water. Animals give off carbon dioxide and plants give off oxygen. If this interchange did not take place, either the animal or the vegetable life would ultimately use up practically all the oxygen or all of the carbon dioxide, and the balance, being completely upset, one would wilt or die and the other would quickly follow. It has recently been discovered that carbon dioxide in small quantities is also essential to most animal life, just as plants use some oxygen.
>
> Hydrogen must be included, although we do not breathe it. Without hydrogen water would not exist, and the water content

> of animal and vegetable matter is surprisingly great and absolutely essential.[1]

Nitrogen also plays an important part in the provisions the earth yields:

> Without nitrogen in some form not a food plant could grow. One way in which nitrogen can get into the soil is through the activities of certain bacteria which inhabit the roots of leguminous plants, such as clover, peas, beans, and many others. These bacteria take atmospheric nitrogen and turn it into combined nitrogen, and when the plant dies some of this combined nitrogen is left in the soil. Another way in which nitrogen gets into the soil is through thunderstorms. Whenever a flash of lightening rushes through the atmosphere, it combines a very small quantity of the oxygen with the nitrogen and the rain brings it to the earth as combined nitrogen.[2]

Thus nitrogen is brought down in the form plant life can absorb. Plants cannot absorb pure nitrogen as it exists in the air.

Solid and liquid metals buried inside the earth are other types of provisions resulting from the way the earth was formed and the conditions it went through. We need not go into any details here. All we say is that the Arabic term *rizq*, or provisions, appears, in the light of our brief discussion, to be wider in scope and significance than what people normally associate with this word. It is more significantly related to the way the earth is made and to the design of the universe as a whole. When God has permitted mankind to eat of it, He has granted them the facility to make use and partake of it and of the earth as a whole: "*Go about, then, in all its highlands and eat of His provisions.*" (Verse 15)

This is, however, all limited to a period of time known only to God as He set the time allowed for testing people through life and death. It

1. Morrison, A. Cressy (1959), *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey: The World's Work (1913) Ltd., pp. 31–33.
2. Ibid., p. 35.

is further confined to all that God makes available for man in this life. When the time of the test is over, death occurs, ushering in what comes after it: "*To Him you will be resurrected.*" (Verse 15) To Him, certainly. It is He who has the dominion over the universe, and with Him all refuge lies. He is able to accomplish anything. If not to Him, to whom would resurrection be?

**When the Earth is Shaken**

At this moment, as they are safe on the face of the earth that has been made easy to live upon, and as they enjoy all this ease that flows by God's leave, this stable earth is shaken violently from under their feet. They feel it quake. The atmosphere surrounding them is suddenly disturbed and a whirlwind engulfs them, hitting their faces and breasts. All this takes place so that they wake up, look up to heaven, try to discern what is in the realm beyond, and be watchful of what God's will may bring about:

> *Do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you up when it quakes? Or do you feel secure that He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a sandy whirlwind. You will come to know the truth of My warning. Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them?* (Verses 16–18)

The people who live on earth enjoying the way it has been smoothed out for their living and who take out of its wealth of resources what they need, realize that it may at times become rebellious, hard for man's living. This takes place when God permits a small disturbance of its system, and things on its surface are severely shaken or destroyed. Whatever happens to be on the surface quakes and can no longer hold its place. We see this when earthquakes occur or volcanoes erupt, revealing an unwieldy beast within the broken mount. Yet God reins it in so that its violent rebellion is brought swiftly under control. It rebels merely for a few seconds, but this is enough to bring about destruction to the structures man has built on its surface; or it may open its mouth to swallow a whole portion of its surface. When it quakes, people are simply helpless, unable to do anything to stop it. In the face of earthquakes, volcanoes

and earth subsidence, people run about aimlessly, like terrified mice in a cage. Yet only seconds before, they were enjoying themselves, oblivious to the Supreme Power that holds everything in place.

People have also experienced whirlwinds, tornadoes and hurricanes that cause much destruction and fire. They can do little to protect themselves against these. When such a storm blows fiercely, hitting faces and breasts with the sand it carries, carrying away with it whatever is in its way, man is clearly powerless, helpless, unless God reins it in.

The Qur'ān reminds people who have long felt secure in their life on earth that such events can always come about and that they can do nothing to stop or control them. Therefore, a telling warning is issued to them: "*You will come to know the truth of My warning.*" (Verse 17) Examples are cited for them from the history of ancient, unbelieving communities: "*Those who lived before them also disbelieved. How terrible was My rejection of them?*" (Verse 18) God rejected that those people of old should disbelieve. He now asks the present unbelievers: "*How terrible was My rejection of them?*" (Verse 18) They were fully aware of how terrible it was. The ruins and other traces of destruction were vivid evidence of how terrible His scourge was.

Moreover, the sense of security that God objects to is that which makes people oblivious of Him, His will and power. This is not the same as the sense of reassurance that believers have about His care and compassion being granted. The two are totally different. A believer always has trust in his Lord, praying for His grace and bounty, but this does not lead him to forgetfulness or to thoughtless indulgence of the earth's pleasures. On the contrary, it makes him always alert, wary that he may incur God's displeasure, keen to avoid any adversity that His will may bring about. Yet, at the same time, he willingly submits himself to God, reassured of His mercy.

'Ā'ishah reports: "I never saw God's Messenger laughing heartily so as to be able to see the inside of his mouth. He only smiled. When God's Messenger saw clouds gathering or felt a wind, he would look worried. I said to him: 'Messenger of God! When people see clouds, they are pleased, hoping that they bring them rain; yet I see you worried when you see clouds gathering.' He said: 'What would assure me, 'Ā'ishah, that it would not bring suffering? People in the past were punished by

means of storms. Others saw the suffering about to overtake them, yet they thought that it was clouds bringing rain'." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Such is the alertness to what God's will may bring, and the lesson to be learnt from the stories mentioned in the Qur'ān. This does not, however, contradict the feeling of reassurance that God's grace and bounty can always be bestowed.

Besides, this is all part of attributing all apparent causes to the main one. The decision in all matters belongs to the One in whose hand rests all dominion. He has power over all things. Avalanches, sandy whirlwinds, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes and other natural forces and phenomena are in no way subject to man; they are totally controlled by God. All that people say about these are merely attempts to explain how they occur. They cannot intervene in bringing them about or in preventing their occurrence. All that they can build on the earth's surface may be wiped out in just a moment, like a house of cards, whether by an earthquake or a hurricane. Hence, they better turn to the Creator of the universe, who has set its laws in operation and who placed in it the forces that occasionally manifest in such events. They should look up to the heavens, the symbol of exaltation, and remember the Sovereign to whom all dominion belongs.

Man's power extends to the limit God has given him. By the same token, knowledge extends by the measure God has assigned man. The controls of this great universe are in the hand of its Creator who has set its laws and powers. These powers operate in accordance with His laws and according to His will. What happens to man as a result of these and what he knows of them are set according to a particular measure. Universal events may at times put man in a position of helplessness towards these great powers. Then, he can do nothing more than remember the Creator and Controller of all these forces and powers, looking up to Him for help, and praying to Him to enable him to use what he can of them.

When man forgets this truth, deluded by what God has granted him of knowledge and ability to use some of these natural forces and powers, he becomes a small creature, isolated from true knowledge that elevates his soul to its sublime origin. He is then attached to the earth, alienated from the rest of the universe. By contrast, a scientist who believes in God

submits with the universe to the Almighty Creator, enjoying a sense of happiness that no one experiences except by God's will.

However, the great forces of nature bring man forcibly into a position of helplessness when he can do nothing other than submit to God, whether he is allowed to enjoy such a sense of happiness or be deprived of it. Man may make discoveries, produce inventions, and acquire much power, yet when he faces the great power of nature, he stands helpless. He may be able to protect himself from a hurricane, but the hurricane will take its course and man cannot stop it. All that his knowledge and planning can achieve is sometimes to enable him to move away from its course. Yet, at times, the hurricane will kill him even though he hides within strong walls. At sea, when a hurricane gathers force, man's largest and best built ships are no more than a doll facing a whirlwind. Earthquakes and volcanoes, on the other hand, remain the same as they have always been. It is only blindness that make some miserable individuals assert that man stands alone in the universe, or that he is the master of the universe.

It is by God's will that man has been assigned trusteeship over the earth, and given the power, ability and knowledge he needs for this task. It is God who takes care of him, and gives him his provisions. Should God abandon him, he would be crushed by even the smallest forces placed at his disposal. Flies, and even smaller creatures, would eat him. It is only by God's care that he is protected and honoured. He should know from where he derives his honour and who bestows on him such great bounty.

### An Invitation to Reflect

This strong warning now gives way to a call to reflect on something that man often sees but rarely considers and contemplates. It is yet another aspect of God's great design of creation and of His limitless power:

> *Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Lord of Grace holds them up. He sees everything.* (Verse 19)

This is a miracle that takes place at every moment, yet because of its familiarity we tend to overlook its testimony of God's great power. Yet, look at the birds: how they spread their wings and then draw them in, but in both situations remain airborne, floating easily and smoothly. Moreover, at times, they make certain movements that appear to be for show, adding beauty to their flight, rising high or diving down at speed. Neither eye nor heart tires of looking at this scene and following each type of bird perform their characteristic movements. It is certainly an enjoyment that invites contemplation of God's beautiful creation. We see here how beauty and perfection go hand in hand.

The *sūrah* first suggests that people should look at this beautiful sight: "*Do they not see the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in?*" (Verse 19) It follows this with a clear indication of God's perfect design: "*None but the Lord of Grace holds them up.*" God holds them up by the laws of nature He has set in operation, maintaining a high standard of harmony that is apparent in all creatures, large and small. To achieve such harmony, every little cell or particle is taken into account. These laws of nature ensure that aspects of balance are set in place, in their thousands, on the earth's surface, in the air and in the shape of birds. Thus, this miracle is achieved and it continues to replicate itself with perfect regularity.

God, the Lord of Grace, holds them up in position with His infinite power that admits no weakening and with His care that never loses sight of His creation. It is His will that keeps the laws of nature working regularly, accurately and harmoniously. Thus, they never slow down even for a wink unless God wills otherwise: "*None but the Lord of Grace holds them up.*" The way this statement is phrased suggests that God's hand holds every bird and every wing in the air, whether the bird is spreading its wings out or drawing them in.

"*He sees everything.*" (Verse 19) He sees them all, knows every minute detail about them, coordinates matters and takes care of every little thing, at every moment. Holding the birds in the air is the same as holding the creatures that walk on earth as it moves in its orbit. It is the same method by which God holds all celestial bodies in place. Who could hold them in position other than God? The *sūrah*, however, presents for us a scene

that we see at all times, allowing its message to touch our hearts. If we look carefully, we realize that everything God makes is miraculous and truly inspirational. Every heart and every generation can feel and see of this miraculous truth what they can understand.

**Who Else?**

The next verse, however, returns unbelievers to fear. Thus they alternate between feelings of fear and admiration of God's creation:

> *What army is there to come to your aid, except for the Lord of Grace? The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.* (Verse 20)

They have been warned lest they be swallowed up by the earth or be overwhelmed by a sandy whirlwind, and they have been reminded of the fate of earlier communities whom God rejected for their disbelief. Now the *sūrah* asks them: who other than He can give them protection against Him? Who can ward off His might other than the Lord of Grace Himself? "*The unbelievers are truly lost in self-delusion.*" Such self-delusion gives them the false feeling of safety and security. They rely on this false sense of security at the very moment they are exposed to His might. They have neither faith nor good action to put forward in support of any plea for mercy from the Lord of Grace.

Next, the *sūrah* mentions the provisions they enjoy but the source of which they overlook. They do not fear that this might be withheld, but instead continue to behave arrogantly:

> *Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision? Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.* (Verse 21)

As we have already said, all people's provisions come, first and foremost, by God's will and the way He designed the universe and made the earth and the atmosphere as they are. All these factors are absolutely beyond mankind's control and cannot be influenced in any way by them. They predate man's creation. They are more powerful than man, and are better able to erase all traces of life as and when God

so wills. Who, then, will provide for mankind, should God withdraw water, or withhold air from them, or indeed any of the elements that are essential for life?

Included under this broad and profound sense of provisions are all the meanings that readily spring to mind when the term is used, and which man tends to treat as of his own making, such as work, invention and production. All these are closely linked to primary causes on the one hand and are dependent on what God grants to individuals and communities on the other. Every breath a worker draws and every movement he makes is part of God's provisions. Is He not the One who originated him, gave him all his abilities and powers, created for him the breath he draws in and the substance that is consumed by his body enabling movement? Every mental endeavour man makes is part of God's provision. Is He not the Creator who gave man the ability to think and invent? Besides, what can anyone produce unless he uses a substance initially made by God, and utilizes natural and human factors provided by Him? "*Who will provide for you, if He were to withhold His provision?*" (Verse 21)

"*Yet they persist in their arrogance and in rebellion.*" (Verse 21) Having established the nature of the provisions people have and made it clear that mankind are totally dependent on God for all this, the *sūrah* paints a picture of people bearing themselves in total arrogance. All arrogance is ugly, but its ugliest form is that demonstrated by those who are dependent on the One who gives them their food, clothing and all that they have. Indeed, they have nothing other than what He bestows on them; yet they persist in their haughty arrogance.

This is indeed a very true picture of those who turn away from the divine message in arrogant rebellion, forgetting that God is their Maker and that they can only survive by His grace. They control nothing whatsoever of their lives or their provisions.

### What Guidance?

On top of all this, they described the Prophet and those who followed him as having gone astray, claiming that they were better guided than them. The same is levelled at the advocates of faith by unbelievers in

every community. Therefore, the *sūrah* paints a true to life image of the status of both parties: "*Is he who goes grovelling on his face better guided than the one who walks upright on a straight path?*" (Verse 22) The one who grovels on his face is either someone who actually walks on his face instead of the right way using his feet and legs, or is someone who trips as he walks, falling on his face. He then lifts himself up only to trip again. Both are miserable conditions, beset with affliction and hardship. Neither leads to proper guidance or goodness. How far removed such conditions are from that of one who walks upright, steady along a way that is free of pitfalls and crookedness, fully aware of the goal towards which he moves.

The first is the situation of a miserable person who has deviated from God's way and, as such, become deprived of His guidance. He is on a collision course with God's laws and creatures, taking up a way different from theirs. Therefore, he is always falling and tripping, tired and lost. The second situation is that of a happy person, benefiting by God's guidance and enjoying travelling along the way charted by believers who always glorify and praise Him. Thus, he joins the procession of the entire universe and of all living and inanimate creatures.

The life of faith is that of ease, straightforwardness and clear objectives. By contrast, the life of disbelief is marked by hardship and error. Which, then, is better guided? Does the question require an answer? It is a rhetorical question, designed to drive its message home.

Both question and answer fade away, giving way to a moving image in which we see two groups of people. The first either grovel or fall on their faces, lacking a goal or charted line. The second group walk with their heads held high. They are steady of step, following a straight path that takes them to a set destination.

In connection with following guidance or error, the *sūrah* reminds people of the means God has provided for them and the faculties of understanding He has equipped them with, yet still they do not put these to good use:

> *Say: It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you thankful.* (Verse 23)

The truth that man was originated by God presses hard on the human mind. It affirms itself in a way that is hard to refute. Man exists in a world in which he is the highest and noblest species known to him. Among all creatures, mankind are equipped with the highest knowledge and the most extensive abilities. Man has not created himself. There must be, then, someone higher, nobler, more able and more knowledgeable than him who brought him into existence. Man must inevitably acknowledge this truth: his very existence puts it before his eyes. To continue trying to deny it is both unworthy and futile.

The *sūrah* mentions this truth here in order to add a reminder about the means of learning, which God has equipped man with: "*Say: It is He who has brought you into being, and given you hearing, sight and hearts.*" How does man receive such great favours and blessings: "*Yet seldom are you thankful.*" (Verse 23)

Hearing and sight are two great miracles about which we have learnt some remarkable aspects. 'Heart' is often used in the Qur'ān in reference to the faculty of knowledge acquisition and understanding. This is an even greater and more remarkable miracle about which we only know very little. It is one of God's secrets in man's creation. Science has made significant attempts to understand the nature of hearing and sight, and here it is perhaps useful to mention briefly some of its findings:

> The hearing system begins with the outer ear, but only God knows where it ends. Science says that sound vibration is carried through the air which directs its entry through the auditory canal to the eardrum, which then transmits it to the labyrinth inside the ear. The labyrinth includes the cochlea and semicircular canals. In the cochlea part there are four thousand minute arches connected to the auditory nerve. Can we imagine the length and size of these arches, and how each of these thousands of arches is fitted in place? What space do they occupy? Yet in this hardly visible labyrinth there are some tiny bones. The ear contains 100,000 hearing cells. The hair cells trigger nerve impulses. Such microscopic accuracy in organization is most amazing.[3]

3. Nawfal, Abd al-Razzaq, (n.d.), *Allah wal-'Ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, p. 57.

> The central part of the visual system is the eye, which includes 130 million light receptors... The eye consists of the sclera, the cornea, the choroid and the retina and a large number of tiny nerves and canals.[4]
>
> The retina is composed of nine separate layers, all of which together are no thicker than thin paper. The inmost layer is made up of rods and cones, which are said to number thirty million rods and three million cones. These are all arranged in perfect relation to each other and to the lens, but, strangely enough, they turn their backs upon the lens and look inward, not outward... The lens of our eye varies in density so that all rays are brought into focus. Man finds this unattainable in any homogeneous substance, such as glass.[5]

'Heart', which is often used in the Qur'ān interchangeably with 'mind', is the quality that makes man what he is. It denotes the faculty of understanding, distinction and knowledge which qualifies man to take charge of the earth and to shoulder the great trust. This is the trust that the heavens, the earth and the mountains feared to bear. It is to believe by choice and to discern guidance by self motivation. It signifies the diligent observance, by will and choice, of the code God has laid down. No one knows the nature of this faculty, or its centre, or whether it is inside or outside the human body. It is a secret God has not given anyone.

Yet despite having all such grace and gifts to fulfil his momentous trust, man is ungrateful to God: "*Yet seldom are you thankful.*" (Verse 23) Man should feel ashamed of himself when he is thus reminded. He does not thank God for all the blessings He has favoured him with. Had man devoted all his life to expressing gratitude to God, it still would not thank Him enough.

4. Ibid., p. 58.
5. Morrison, op. cit., p. 60.

**The Promise Fulfilment**

A reminder follows making it clear that God has not created mankind and given them all their distinctive qualities haphazardly, without a definite purpose: it is all for the purpose of initiating life that incorporates a test and then the administering of reward and requital at the end: "*And He it is who caused you to multiply on earth; and to Him you shall be gathered.*" (Verse 24)

The Arabic term *dhar'*, used in the verse to denote multiplication also signifies 'spreading far and wide', which provides a contrast in both image and meaning with the second action of gathering. The *sūrah* gives both images in a short verse so as to present these vividly before our eyes. Thus, people who have spread all over the earth will realize that they are moving towards an end that brings them all together for an ultimate purpose: one that brings the test of life and death to its final goal.

The *sūrah* then mentions their doubts concerning this promised gathering: "*They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?'*" (Verse 25) Such a question is put only by one who is in serious doubt or one who is in stubborn denial. Knowing the exact time of the fulfilment of the promise adds nothing to its truth. It has nothing to do with the fact that it is the time appointed for requital after the test has been completed. It is the same to them whether it takes place tomorrow or after millions of years. What is certain is that it is going to happen. Then they will be gathered to receive what they deserve for what they have done in their lives.

God has not imparted knowledge of the Day of Judgement to anyone of His creatures, because such knowledge serves none of their interests. Indeed, imparting such information is against the very nature of this day and has no bearing on the duties people are asked to fulfil in preparation for it. On the contrary, withholding such information from all creatures and keeping it with God Almighty is an act of wisdom that serves human interests. Hence the answer: "*Say: God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 26)

This answer clearly reflects the great difference between the Creator and His creation. God is seen in His absolute oneness: no one bears any similarity to Him and He has no partner. All knowledge belongs to

Him alone. All creatures, including prophets and angels, stand before Him in complete humility: "*Say: God alone has knowledge of this. I am only a plain warner.*" I have a mission and a task, to warn and to make things plain. Knowledge belongs solely to the All-Knowing.

We see them here putting forward questions that imply doubts and being given firm and decisive answers. The *sūrah* then presents an image depicting the subject of their questioning, this day has now arrived. The promise they have seriously doubted is fulfilled and they face it here and now: "*When they see it close at hand, the unbelievers' faces will be stricken with grief, and it will be said: 'This is what you were calling for.'*" (Verse 27) Here is this day that you have always claimed will never take place; it is staring you in the face.

The Qur'ān often uses this method of painting in the present what is to happen in future. The purpose is to counter the state of doubt with an element of surprise. The doubter is shown a scene of something happening which he has denied will ever happen. But it is a true image. This day is present in God's knowledge. The time gap separating it from us is true in relation to us. This is a relative matter that does not represent the plain truth of this day as it is in God's sight. If God wills, they will see it now as it is in His knowledge. Thus, what the *sūrah* does, moving suddenly from this present life to that of the hereafter, and from the attitude of doubt to suddenly facing the truth represents a reality that, had God so willed, they would see now. The *sūrah* paints this reality in a clear and effective way.

### Awaiting the Prophet's Death

The unbelievers hoped that the Prophet and the small group that followed him would soon perish, thereby ridding them of a problem that caused much anxiety. They counselled each other to persist until he so died, when they would be able to patch things up and resume their life as before. Sometimes they voiced the claim that God would take Muḥammad and his followers away because they were in error, fabricating lies against God! Hence, as the *sūrah* puts before them the scene of gathering and requital on the Day of Judgement, it alerts them to the fact that even if their wish were fulfilled, they would not be

immune from facing the consequences of their disbelief. Therefore, it is far better for them to be well prepared for this appointed day, shown to them as though it were taking place there and then:

> *Say: Just think: whether God destroys me and those who follow me, or bestows mercy upon us, who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?* (Verse 28)

They will be well advised to think of their own situation and their own future. What benefit would accrue to them if the Prophet and his followers died? Likewise, should God bestow His mercy on the Prophet and his followers, this would not by itself protect the unbelievers from their inevitable fate. God, who let them multiply on earth and who will eventually gather them, is eternal. He never dies. Yet the *sūrah* does not say to them, 'who will protect you from suffering?' It does not specify that they are unbelievers. It simply tells them of the painful suffering that awaits unbelievers. This is a wise approach, instilling fear in their hearts on the one hand, and on the other giving them the chance to review their situation. Had the *sūrah* described them as unbelievers and that they would be certain to suffer painful punishment, they might have retorted with outright rejection and stubborn insolence. It is often the case that dropping a hint is far more effective than making a blunt statement.

The *sūrah* then outlines the believers' attitude, one based on faith, and how they place their full trust in God, relying on Him. They are very confident, assured that they are on the right course, well guided, and that the unbelievers are in manifest error:

> *Say: He is the Lord of Grace: in Him we believe, and in Him we place our trust. You will come to know who is in manifest error.* (Verse 29)

That God is mentioned here by His great attribute, the Lord of Grace, refers to His profound and infinite mercy which He grants to His Messenger and the believers who follow him. He will not destroy them as the unbelievers wish He would.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to highlight the bonds they have with their Lord, the Lord of Grace. The first is the bond of faith, "*in*

*Him we believe,*" and this is followed by one of total reliance, "*and in Him we place our trust.*" The phraseology of this verse suggests a close relation between them and God who favours His Messenger and the believers with the permission to announce this close relationship. Indeed, God instructs the Prophet to announce it, as if He is saying to him: 'Do not be afraid of what the unbelievers say. You and those with you are attached to Me, and you are permitted by Me to declare that you are the recipient of this honour, so announce it to them.' What a great gesture of honour!

This is followed by an implicit warning: "*You will come to know who is in manifest error.*" (Verse 29) This is phrased in such a way that should make them ashamed of their stubborn rejection of the divine faith. It also invites them to review their positions, lest they be the ones who are in complete error. If they are, this inevitably makes them subject to painful suffering, as clearly stated in the previous verse: "*who will protect the unbelievers from painful suffering?*" (Verse 28) At the same time, the *sūrah* does not outrightly brand them as being in error, so as not to harden their attitude. This method of advocacy is one that works well with some people.

## The Final Note

The *sūrah* ends with a note that mentions punishment in this present life in the form of depriving the unbelievers of the most essential thing of life, namely, water:

> *Say: Just think: if all your water were to sink underground, who would give you clear flowing water?* (Verse 30)

This is something so close and necessary for people's lives. They should therefore consider this move carefully if they cannot think of the Day of Judgement as certain. All dominion rests in God's hand and He is able to accomplish anything. What will their position be should He will that they be deprived of this most essential life element? They are left to contemplate this unthinkable eventuality, should God will it to happen.

Thus, this *sūrah* concludes, having taken us on a grand tour reaching up to great horizons and profound depths. Almost every verse provides a distinct beat. It can be seen as a journey into the unknown, or indeed into a close, visible world that is often overlooked. It is a grand *sūrah*, much greater than its length or the number of its verses. It is like arrows pointing far into the distance, with each aiming at a separate world.

The *sūrah* addresses a number of very important Islamic concepts. It establishes the truth of God's absolute power and His absolute sovereignty; the trial of death and life as a prelude to resurrection and requital; the beauty and perfection of God's design; His absolute knowledge of secrets and inner thoughts: of God being the source of all provisions; of His guardianship of all His creatures; of His presence with every creature, as well as a number of other truths that are part of a believer's concept of God, the universe and life. It is from this concept that a believer derives his code of living and his attitude towards God, himself, the rest of mankind, living creatures and the universe. It is this concept that shapes a believer's conscience, feelings, personality, values and standards.